

A look at Raga Lakṣaṇa

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Let us, first of all, see how we understand the term, raga, today.

Says Professor V.V. Sadagopan, "...Let us recognize that, in Karnataka music, the term Raga is not always used in the same sense...when we say that the raga of the Dikṣitar Kṛitī, "Maye tvam ya hi," is *Taraṅgiṇī* or *Sudha Taraṅgiṇī* we mean that particular tune... this raga begins and ends with the composition...That was one meaning, a rather loose meaning, of the term, Raga."¹ A host of such other raga-s may be listed-Bangalā (Gīrajāsuta) and Bindumalini (Enta muddo) of Tyagaraja, Cintamani (Devi brava samayamīde) of Syama Sastri and so on.

Continues Professor Sadagopan, "...when we refer to all the scales as raga-s we again use the word in a loose sense of the term. This is the second meaning of the term Raga in use today."² It must be pointed out here that it is erroneous to hold Venkatamakhi, the architect of the seventy-two mela scheme, responsible for the growth of this modern usage of the term, raga. For, the seventy-two mela-s were, to him, mere assemblages of the sapta svara-s,³ conceived *solely* for the purpose of classifying raga-s which existed then, those in the process of evolving and those which were going to be evolved later:⁴ his mela-s were, therefore, obviously non-singable.

It is rather unfortunate that in the modern times the mela-s of Venkatamakhi, by extension all scales- have come to be identified as raga-s as such. With the seventy-two mela-s of Venkatamakhi (devised originally for classifying raga-s) held today to be a perennial source for the creation of new raga-s (this being achieved by the mere (theoretical) removal of one or more svara-s from the seven svara- mela-s)⁵, the world of Carnatic music is literally flooded with these *raga-s*!

What are the true raga-s, then? These are, what have, to quote Professor V.V. Sadagopan again, "...an inherent potentiality for elabo-

ration." (Shall we add, elaboration on purely aesthetic lines, of musical, seed idea' in order to distinguish it from the scalar elaboration which often goes along with the scales aggrandized as raga-s). However, the elaboration varies in proportion from raga to raga; it could in some cases be very little, in some a little more and in others, in great measure.

Thus, such raga-s which contain an inherent 'seed idea' giving scope for elaboration-great or small-are the raga-s proper.⁷ In fact, raga ālapana-s are built upon these musical 'seed ideas' on the basis of aesthetic principles (imbibed intuitively), the proportion of expansion being dictated by the elasticity of the raga. It is such raga-s as these which have the inherent capacity of evoking aesthetic joy in the listener.⁸

It is obviously these raga-s which can, on account of having well-defined entities (referred to as svarūpa-s), have any lakṣaṇa to speak of the lakṣaṇa-s of the other so-called raga-s which are little more than scales⁹ - being descriptions of movement with reference basically to their ārōhaṇa-avarōhaṇa-s).

How do we go about designating the lakṣaṇa of a given raga (proper) strictly speaking, a fully satisfying delineation of the raga in words is not possible, for, singing is one medium while speaking, another. Still, just as one gets a thrill recounting a joyous experience in words or in a poem, one may derive some joy articulating the experiencing of a raga in terms of aspects of beauty perceivable in its make-up.

These principles (not rules) relating to the raga's movement (calana) may be evolved with reference to phrases occurring in the raga¹⁰. The phrases most ideal for effectively beginning the raga ālapana are those which are required for establishing the raga in the course of ālapana, those which serve as endings of larger phrases, those that figure only toward the end of the ālapana, those which are rendered but sparingly, the phrases which mark the limits of the raga's movement in tara or mandra sthayi-s, those which occur only in combination with some other phrases but never in isolation, so on and so forth. Thus a phrase which, unlike ārōhaṇa-avarōhaṇa, belongs to the raga (like a fragment to the whole) is taken as the unit with which speak the lakṣaṇa.

Usually compositions ("crystallized raga-s") are considered to act as models for raga lakṣaṇa. A little reflection will show that ideally speaking, it should not be so. Compositions, even of the greatest composers, have to primarily satisfy various norms relating to their structures and cannot, therefore, be expected to act as representations of raga svarūpa-s to the fullest extent. Moreover, raga-s being organic, are in eternal flux while compositions set in them are comparatively

stagnant, these not modified as radically and as often as the changes in the raga demand. The alapana-s are, thus, fuller representations of our conceptions of raga-s than the compositions.

An argument could be made here. That for a given raga at a given point of time, there does not exist one single ālāpana but rather, these are co-existing multiple ālāpana-s this should make raga alapana unsuitable and the comparatively static compositions more preferable for a study of raga laksana. However, it is possible to extract the defining characteristics of the raga from the multiple alapana-s the raga admits of: after all, it is this core that is at the root of the varied expositions of the raga, binding them into one. Again, it is this core which is grasped by the singer (intuitively) and elaborated upon.

It has to be kept in view that raga laksana is not making a (futile) effect to present the infinite nature of the raga rather, it is, to get at the heart of it, i.e., to capture and define the characteristics which establish its identity.

To conclude, to one who has experienced a raga, its laksana is something a mental recapitulation of it, while to the uninitiated, it should be a happy prelude to the experience of it.

References

- 1 V.V. Sadagopan, "An Introduction to Raga," *Indian Music Journal*, April-May, 1965, Vol. III pp. 27-28.
- 2 Ibid
- 3 The seventy-two varieties result on account of the fact that five out of the sapta svara-s have more than one svarasthana.
- 4 *Caturdandi Prakāśika*, eds. Pts. S. Subrahmanya Sastri, T.V. Subba Rao and T.L. Venkatraman Iyer, Pub. by the Music Academy, Madras, 1934, repr. 1986. p.42
- 5 The coming into being of a new raga through intuitive means, i.e., without the conscious idea of a scale, is almost totally unrecognized today.
- 6 V.V. Sadagopan, "An Introduction to Raga," *Indian Music Journal*, April-May 1965, Vol. III pp. 27-28.
- 7 For example, Todī, Bhairavī, Kedaragaula, Sahana, Mukhari and such other traditionally handed-down raga-s.
- 8 What is meant here is that the raga-s are pleasing on their own accord, i.e., not considering the quality deriving from the performer's voice (or instrument) or his rendering ability, etc. Is this what the oft-quoted definition of a raga, "Sato ranjayati iti ragah srotucitta sukhavahah."
- 9 It is not being denied that a scale could at times inspire the birth of a raga or that a scale may attain ragatva over a period of time. It is only being pointed out that the idea that all conceivable scales-without exception-are potential raga-s, is not conducive to the healthy growth of the raga concept.
- 10 A study of raga laksana is made today with necessary reference to old terms, eg., graha, amsa, audava, shadava, etc., without first of all establishing their meanings in the modern context. The need of the hour is to speak in terms well-understood by us and more suited to the purpose on hand.